MEZZOTINTO ENGRAVING

BY

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PREFACE.

MEZZOTINTO Engraving, in its purest form, may be said to have died in this country in the forepart of the present century, with the early work of Samuel Cousins, while its renascence, the work, in the first instance, of Seymour Haden, is still in course of accomplishment by Frank Short, Joseph Knight, J. Aumonier, and other able workers in this fascinating field.

Duly to appraise this beautiful process, slightly to sketch its history, and earnestly to advocate its more complete revival under best and purest forms, is the object of the writer, whose admiration for the Mezzotinter's Art must plead his excuse for venturing to advocate a cause he loves with an unaccustomed pen.

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Fig.2.

MEZZOTINTO-ENGRAVING.

a still earlier form of engraving. Rockers with chisel-like edges were employed sometimes alone, and sometimes with the ordinary serrated edged tool, by which means great variety of texture could be produced. Claude is said to have roughened a plate with pumice-stone, and produced his subject by burnishing away the tint caused by the simple abrasion of the copper.

The plate, having been grounded, is left untouched by the Engraver in the darkest parts of the design, while, for the middle tints, (mezzotinto) it is scraped down so as to hold only a little ink, and burnished perfectly smooth in the lightest spots. Small high-lights are produced by hammering the plate up from behind, thus making an actual projection, where simple burnishing would leave a slight hollow, capable, however highly polished, of holding some little ink. Great care must be taken not to pare away the grain too fast, for this is not easily reproduced; but in case of need, small rockers, or roulettes, are employed to restore the lost roughening.

During the progress of engraving, it is necessary to take proofs, or impressions, from the plate, in order

to show how the work is progressing, and since the plate deteriorates materially, in richness and depth of colour, with every proof pulled, these are anxious moments for the artist. Referring to them, Seymour Haden says pathetically, "the Engraver's Proof is a nightmare, a perfect sacrifice"; and, speaking of his plate of Calais Pier, an engraving after Turner's picture, exclaims, "I have had to take seven of these impressions, and I declare that an eighth would go far to break my heart."

Mezzotinto possesses peculiar advantages for the treatment of such subjects as portraiture, and night effects, where strong contrasts of light and shade occur, but, being rich and soft in character, with the corresponding defect of vagueness, it is less happily employed for crowded compositions. Some of the splendid "solid proofs" obtained from the plates of McArdell, Earlom, Raphael Smith, and others, were largely due to the excellent linen paper on which they were printed, this being of a peculiar make and quite unobtainable in the present day. Had the technique of the old printers approached the standard of to-day, the

number of rich impressions of many fine works would be immensely greater.

One word as to the relative qualities of mezzotinto and other forms of engraving. Line engraving, excepting in the hands of a great master, is cold in effect and unsympathetic in rendering tone. Stipple and chalk engraving give tone, but the dots have always an inartistic appearance. Etching possesses charms the exact opposites of those belonging to mezzotint, its beauty consisting in freedom of line and distinctiveness of handling. Dry point, perhaps, most nearly approaches mezzotint in soft rich qualities, which are not unlike those produced by the "rocker;" but the greatest charm of mezzotinto consists in its rendering of tone in contradistinction to the rendering of form.

The discovery of the process of coating an engraved copper plate with an electro deposit of steel, rendering it as durable as steel itself, leaves no sufficient reason for continuing to use the harder metal, which is itself ill adapted to mezzotinting, being cold, hard, and unsympathetic.

Before attempting to sketch the History of Mezzo-

tinto, let me recall to your minds the high perfection to which the Engraver's Art had been carried before the middle of the Seventeenth Century, when mezzotinto was invented, in order that we may better understand the interest which its introduction was calculated to create among accomplished Connoisseurs, men accustomed to appreciate the great Painter-Engravers, whose works have not yet and, probably, never will be surpassed.

Albert Durer (1471-1528), who may be considered the father of Engraving, was already looked upon as an old master. Van Dyck (1599-1641), whose portrait etchings were superb, was only lately dead. Rembrandt (1606-1669), acknowledged to be the finest etcher who ever lived, was doing his best work with the needle; while Hollar (1617-1677), an Engraver of the first rank, was reproducing pictures after the greatest masters, and William Faithorne, an Englishman (——1691) whose splendid work with the burin is now so eagerly sought, was in his prime. I mention only men in the first flight of excellence, but they had many cotemporaries of nearly equal importance. Never, indeed,

was the Art of Engraving practised by abler hands than at the time of the discovery of Mezzotinto.

The fable, formerly current, that Prince Rupert invented this art, while watching the markings made upon a piece of rag with which one of his soldiers was cleaning a rusty gun, is pleasingly ingenious, but wholly untenable. Rupert was, however, considered as the inventor until 1839, when Léon Laborde brought the actual discoverer to light in von Siegen. The error in question was promulgated by John Evelyn, of diary fame, who was the first to print an account of the art in a little treatise on Chalcography, published in London (1662), wherein he gives the Prince the credit of having "invented" the "new way of engraving, or mezzotinto," as it was then styled.

Evelyn should have contented himself with the statement that Rupert *communicated* the process to him, for it is conclusively proved that Ludwig von Siegen, a Lieutenant-Colonel in the service of the Landgrave of Hesse, was really the inventor, a fact which is shown by a letter of his, dated 12-19th August, 1642, still preserved at Cassel.

Addressing the Landgrave, to whom he forwards a mezzotint portrait of his mother, Amelia Elizabeth, Siegen says:

"This is the print from copper, gracious Prince and Lord, which I promised to prepare for the ever praise-worthy memory of your Grace's mother, in order that many illustrious persons, acquainted with the actions of so widely famed a princess, might be enabled to possess the likeness of her person. But since I have discovered a new or singular invention of a kind never hitherto beheld, I have, on account of the nicety of the work, been able only to have few copies struck off, not thousands, as in the case of ordinary engravings, and therefore can with them only oblige a few persons. I could not neglect to dedicate to your Grace, as an extraordinary amateur of Art, such a rare and hitherto unseen work of Art;" and later, "the present method is all merely dots, which information I did not wish to conceal from your Grace as being well skilled in Art."

You will observe that, however unwilling to hide anything from his "Gracious Prince and Lord," von Siegen is careful not to say how the "dots" in question were

produced. Evelyn is equally cautious in the treatise already cited, for he says, "I did not think it necessary that an art so curious, and (as yet) so little vulgar, was to be prostituted at so cheap a rate as the mere naked describing of it here would too soon have exposed it to;" but he goes on to say "that he is ready, *sub sigillo*, and by his Highness's (Prince Rupert's) permission, to gratify any curious and worthy person, with as full and perfect a demonstration of the entire art, as my talent and address will reach to."

The truth about Prince Rupert and von Siegen (who was well acquainted with other forms of engraving) seems to be as follows:

They met at Brussels, where, finding a kindred spirit, whether in the arts or arms, the latter told the former his secret, and, in 1658, the Prince scraped his first mezzotint plate. By him the method was made known to Wallarant Vailliant, who, coming to England in Rupert's suite, produced a copy of a mezzotint portrait of and by his patron, recording him, on the plate itself, as the inventor of the art. It is a curious point, that this misstatement must surely have been made with the knowledge of Prince Rupert himself.

Succeeding von Siegen, Rupert, and Vailliant, the earliest mezzotinters, came Theodor Caspar of Furstenberg, Canon of Maintz, John Verkolj, Amstelodamus (1650-1693), John Thomas, of Y'pres, a pupil of Rubens (1610-1677), Paul van Somer, who settled in England and died in London, 1694; John Vandewaart of Haarlem (1687), Nicholas van Haften of Gorcum (1670), Gerard Valck (died 1720).

William Sherwin, born about 1650, was the earliest English mezzotinter, and it is probable that he acquired a knowledge of the art from Prince Rupert himself. His engraved portrait of Charles II. bears the date 1669. He completed only a few plates, a fact which is probably due to his being in easy circumstances. Sherwin was followed by Francis Place, an English mezzotinter who died in 1728, leaving only a small amount of work behind him.

Abraham Blooteling, born at Amsterdam in 1634, was an important factor in the origination of the English school. After learning the art, probably from Furstenberg, he came to England in 1673, but, three years later, returned to his native country. In his absence, Du Blois, who laid his grounds, sold the secret of his

process, for forty shillings, to Lloyd, a print-seller in the Strand. Lloyd, being unable to make use of the knowledge thus acquired, passed it on to Isaac Beckett, who, together with a clever artist named Robert Williams (1680-1704), exercised the art extensively in this country, and thus practically founded the English school.

John Smith (1652-1742) produced many fine plates, working chiefly after Sir Godfrey Kneller. Francis Kite, who, after standing in the pillory for forgery, with natural modesty changed his name in 1725 to Milvius, was another excellent mezzotinter. Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723) left a few plates behind him, and was at one time supposed to have invented the art, but was probably instructed by Evelyn or Prince Rupert, with both of whom he was on friendly terms. John Faber, Junr., was born in Holland and came to England with his father, another mezzotinter. Dying in 1656, his mantle descended upon James McArdell, born at Dublin in 1729, who carried the art forward from the high level at which Faber had left it by grafting upon the latter's accuracy of treatment a

boldness, decision, and freedom of handling which was all his own. McArdell was a pupil of John Brooks, another Irishman, who came to London about 1740. This great mezzotinter was thoroughly appreciated by Sir Joshua Reynolds, who is reported to have said that when his pictures had faded he would still be immortalized by McArdell's mezzotints.

Richard Houstoun (1722-1775), also an Irishman, and pupil of Brooks, followed McArdell. He was clever, but indolent and dissipated. John Finlayson (1730-1776) succeeded him, and was a painter as well as an engraver, his principal works being copies of Sir Joshua's portraits. Of William Pether (1731-1821) little is to be said beyond recording his name among the list of good mezzotinters; but Valentine Green, born at Salford, near Evesham, in 1739, shares with McArdell and Earlom the honour of bringing the art to its highest perfection. Green was appointed Associate Engraver to the Royal Academy in 1775, and died in 1813, leaving nearly 400 fine plates behind him as his contribution to mezzotinto. John Dixon was born in Dublin about 1740. His portrait of the Duke of

Leinster, after Sir Joshua, is a masterpiece, and was characterized as "unsurpassable" by Walpole. James Watson, born in 1740, was another important engraver after Reynolds. Robert Laurie, born about 1740, was a member of the still surviving firm which formerly published some of the rarest eighteenth-century prints at the sign of the "Golden Buck" in Fleet Street. He invented printing in colours from a mezzotint plate, a process for which the Society of Arts awarded him a medal. Thomas Watson, born in 1743, was one of the great masters of the art, which he pursued in partnership with William Dickinson, another skilful engraver resident for many years in Bond Street.

Robert Dunkarton, William Sharp, Peter Pelham, and John Dean were all good engravers at this period; but chief among them must be distinguished John Raphael Smith, son of Smith of Derby, the landscape painter, who was not only one of the finest reproducers in mezzotint, but an excellent painter as well. Then we have Gainsborough Dupont, William Ward, and William Say (1768-1834), of whom the last scraped the first successful, so far as it could be successful, mezzotint

on steel. Thomas Goff Lupton engraved many of the Liber Studiorum plates; David Lucas reproduced Constable's landscapes with wonderful dexterity and thorough feeling for the spirit of his work; Charles Turner, well known for his landscapes and portraits; Dawes, Clint, Hodgett, and Annis were also all good men.

J. M. W. Turner was one of the last and greatest mezzotinto engravers. The plates of his Liber Studiorum, scraped on copper and fortified with strongly etched lines, were either produced by himself or by Lupton, Dawes, Charles Turner, and others, working under his immediate superintendence. Some studies in *pure* mezzotint were found after Turner's death of which only a few trial proofs had been taken during the artist's lifetime, conclusively proving that it had been his intention to give to the world some pure mezzotints in the Liber Series. Rawlinson says of his "Ben Arthur" plate: "This is the last great plate of the published portion of the Liber, and I think it is not too much to say that, were all Turner's other works lost, upon the strength of this alone his pre-eminent fame as a landscape draughtsman might safely rest.

Whose hand but his could have so drawn those sweeping mountain curves, could have so wedged in the loose array of stones at their base, could have given that grand gloom of the storm at the head of the ravine, or the grace to the fleecy clouds which cling about the hill-top?"

Samuel Cousins, R.A., whose splendid works, after Sir Thomas Lawrence and Sir Joshua Reynolds must not be forgotten, was the last important pure mezzotinter on copper. Since then, the market has been flooded, as Haden truly says, "with thousands of flat and worthless impressions, to supply the demand for something that will '*tell*;' for exaggerations of size, violent contrasts and vulgar effects, for blackness which is not shadow, whiteness which is not light, and quantity which is not quality."

There is little doubt but that James Watt, the inventor of the steam engine, was indirectly responsible for the decline of mezzotinto in England, inasmuch as he first suggested the use of steel instead of copper plates to workers in this art. As soon as it became known that it was possible for 1000 impressions to be

taken from a steel plate, while only[1] eighty impressions could be obtained from a copper plate, the latter were soon practically driven out of the market. This was a death-blow to fine mezzotints; for all the depth of colour and subtleness of tone obtainable from a copper plate gives way to comparative crudity when steel is employed in its place. The capabilities of the harder metal were, however, commercially speaking, very great, while the number of the purchasing public able to distinguish between good and indifferent work was small. Meanwhile the large profits obtainable from the great numbers of prints procurable from a steel plate made more than amends, unfortunately, with the publisher for inferiority in the engraver's productions. Hence the decay of mezzotinto.

But we live in an age when good work is again obtaining recognition, and if mezzotints do not once more secure public patronage, it will not be for want

[1] The quality of hand-worked, or hammered, copper of those days had much to do with obtaining even this limited number of proofs. Steam rolling mills have since taken the place of the brains and hands of the craftsman, to the great loss of solidity in the plates.

of good material to work upon (for copper plates which can be steel-faced are available); a good printer, while we have Goulding; publishers possessed of excellent taste; or, lastly, of able artists.

So long as the names of Francis Seymour Haden, Frank Short, J. Aumonier, Joseph Knight, C. W. Campbell, G. Robinson, and others remain inscribed on the roll of mezzotinters, only the support of a discriminating public is needed in order to complete the revival, so happily begun, of their beautiful art.

In Memoriam.

This paper was written in March. Since then death has robbed us of C. W. Campbell, one of the most promising workers in pure mezzotint. An ardent student of Mr. Ruskin's writings, he aimed to realize in his work, that writer's high standard becoming to a true student of art. It is not too much to say that his work will live after him, proving an excellent modern example of mezzotint, dear to the collector and of practical benefit to those who study the art.

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